



Transcend  
BUILDING BEYOND THE LIMITS OF SCHOOL DESIGN

# A GUIDE TO YOUR SCHOOL DESIGN *Blueprint*

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*This photo and cover photo from  
Summit Public Schools*



Transcend is a national nonprofit organization focused on innovation in school design. We support communities in creating and spreading extraordinary, equitable learning environments.

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# LOCAL CONTEXT

The larger context in which the learning environment exists.

Your learning environment can not be separated from the local context it is situated within. The context presents opportunities and constraints that influence your learning environment. Documenting your local context will help others more fully understand the design of your learning environment. If you aspire to spread elements of your learning environment to other contexts, it is also important for adopters to understand how their locality is similar or different.

## What will make this part of your design articulation *awesome*?

- ✓ **Ground it in Your Community:** Speak to the most important assets and needs of those in your community
- ✓ **Ground it in the Larger Ecosystem Context:** Speak to the economic, social, technological, and political factors constraining or enabling your design decisions.
- ✓ **Grounded it in Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion:** Speak to the equity challenges present in the community--to the disparities in outcomes and opportunities that exist for individuals across lines of difference like race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, home language, and socioeconomic status.

We've found it's common and important to document information on three topics pertaining to your local context:

- The community your learning environment will serve. This includes who is part of the



community, such as who your students and their families are, as well as who makes up the local social and economic fabric of the community. It also includes assets and needs that characterize the community. Is there a current industry that fuels the community? What shifts in the economy have occurred recently? Has there been a recent change in demographics, employment, politics, or another area?

- The larger ecosystem that influences your learning environment. The larger ecosystem consists of economic, social, technological, and political opportunities and constraints that are important to understand. For example, a new policy that grants seat time waivers may present you with new flexibilities in terms of your school's schedule or changes to the tax code may be decreasing your budget for the next 10 years.
- Diversity, equity, and inclusion in your local context. This includes any challenges or opportunities related to diversity, equity, and inclusion in your learning environment. Does your student population reflect the full diversity of the larger community? What



about your staff? Are students and staff experiencing equitable opportunities within the community and learning environment or are some students being marginalized and excluded? When you disaggregate outcome data across various subgroups, are there gaps? Are these gaps related to student demographics and deepen inequity?

Work to ensure you capture the full complexity of the context. Don't just focus on the challenges and the barriers; also consider opportunities and assets.

Summarizing information on the local context in writing is helpful, but also seriously consider

using other formats. It can be helpful to include links to existing data, articles, photos, videos, or other artifacts. You could also capture new photos or video, or interview community members and transcribe their responses. This provides the community members with the opportunity to share their own perspectives and have their voices prioritized.

Also, if you are creating one design that you will implement in various contexts there may be a need to do more documenting since each of the contexts is unique and may require slight deviations from the core design.

*Transcend School Design Convening*





# PURPOSE

## The overarching role the learning environment must play.

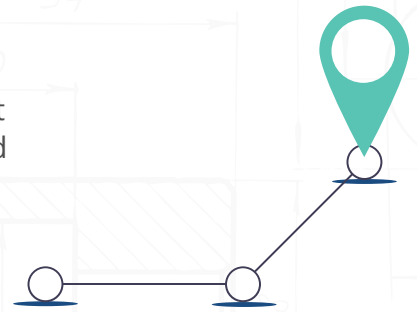
Your statement of purpose acts as a meaningful and memorable north star for your learning environment that provides both inspiration and guidance. Highlights what is unique about your learning environment and the role you play in the local context

### What will make this part of your design articulation *awesome*?

- ✓ **Express a Point of View:** Your purpose should be specific enough to guide design choices rather than being generic and applicable to all contexts.
- ✓ **Grounded It in Your Local Context:** It should be grounded in the specific community assets and needs as well as the larger ecosystem.
- ✓ **Grounded in Equity:** It should speak to diversity, equity, and/or inclusion challenges present in your community, providing some sense of how you will address them.

Your purpose will likely be communicated in just a few paragraphs and may include things like:

- A mission statement that communicates the overarching goal of your learning environment or what it will accomplish with students.
- A vision statement that captures what your learning environment will be like and how it will support your mission.
- A “case for change” that connects back to your local context and explores why your context requires a different kind of learning environment than what currently exists.
- Details on how your learning environment will address diversity, equity, and inclusion opportunities or challenges.



Concourse Village Elementary School

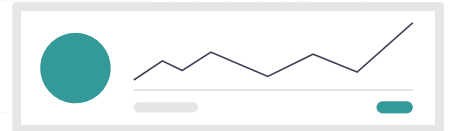
# GRADUATE AIMS

The learning outcomes the environment will drive toward.

Graduate aims break your purpose down into more concrete, measurable outcomes that you can work toward with students in order to achieve the larger purpose. Anchor your design by helping you make decisions about what to include or exclude in your learning environment. Can help everyone monitor progress and get better.

## What will make this part of your design articulation *awesome*?

- ✓ **Be Clear:** The information presented on each aim should give the reader a clear understanding of the knowledge, skills, and mindsets that each aim develops.
- ✓ **Make Them Sticky:** The number of aims and the way they are communicated should make them sticky or memorable.
- ✓ **Ensure They're Observable:** You should include observable indicators that specifically describe what learners would do to demonstrate mastery of this aim by the time they leave the environment.
- ✓ **Aligned to Purpose:** Your aims should, together, fulfill the purpose of the learning environment.
- ✓ **Strive for Transformation:** Your aims should demonstrate a shift toward a definition of student success that will prepare all young people to thrive in and transform the 21st century while retaining the core parts of their culture and values (See [Leaps](#)).



Go for 3-7 aims overall. This will help ensure your stakeholders can remember them. More than eight aims will become harder to hold in working memory. You can also make your overall aims framework more memorable by having the aims relate in some way, for example through rhyming, alterations, or some common schema like head, hear, hands.

An aims framework that demonstrates a transformative shift from traditional outcomes will include a range of academic and career knowledge and skills, transferable thinking skills, and social emotional competencies. Having aims that span this range acknowledges that young people need to develop a wider range of knowledge, skills, and mindsets to be successful in the 21st century and that learning and healthy development are influenced by a combination of cognitive, social, and emotional factors.





Valor Collegiate Academies

For each aim we've found it's important to articulate three key things about each aim;

- A memorable name for the aim. The name may be memorable because, for example, it's a widely used term (e.g. interdisciplinary thinking skills), because it has been or a connection to your local context, or because it's connected to your other aims.
- What the aim means. At first, this may only include a short definition. Over time, you'll also need to identify and document a more robust set of standards or competencies that describe the underlying knowledge, skills, and mindsets students will demonstrate when they master each aim.
- Observable indicators for each aim. These are behaviors or demonstrations that show a learner has mastered the aim. They should reflect the full set of knowledge, skills, and mindset that each aim entails. The most helpful indicator frameworks include what the aim looks like at various points of development across a student's time in the learning environment

# DESIGN PRINCIPLES

Core characteristics of the learning environment and the experiences learners have within it that weave across the design and help it feel coherent.

Creating design principles support the development of a coherent overall school design by establishing a small set of characteristics that should be reflected across the vast majority of the environment. These principles help to communicate the overall ethos, beliefs, and/or values of your learning environment to those within and beyond it.

## What will make this part of your design articulation *awesome*?

- ✓ **Be Clear:** The information you present about your design principle should give the reader a clear understanding of each principle that includes enough detail to drive design decisions.
- ✓ **Make Them Sticky:** The number of principles and the way you communicate them should be memorable.
- ✓ **Ground Them in “Why”:** Explain why each was chosen as a design principle. It could be because of your purpose, local context, future trends, the science of learning and development or other factors.
- ✓ **Strive for Transformation:** Your principles should demonstrate a shift toward an environment that will better prepare all young people to thrive in and transform the 21st century (See [Leaps](#)).

Your design principles are foundational to your overall school design. You will strive to make this come alive with nearly every decision you make, so choose them with care. Sometimes it can be

hard to differentiate aims from design principles. Keep in mind that design principles describe the learning environment or what young people will experience whereas aims describe the outcomes the environment will lead to. For some communities, design principles may be the same as core values or beliefs.

Your principles should put a stake in the ground about the ways your school demonstrates a transformative shift from the inequitable, industrial-era model of school that has persisted for nearly two hundred years. Transcend's Leaps for Equitable, 21st Century Learning can provide some inspiration for how to achieve this.

As with graduate aims, go for 3-7 principles. For each principle we've found it's important to articulate three key things about each principles;

- A memorable name for the principle. The name may be memorable because, for example, it's short and to-the-point, bold, or richly descriptive. Rhyming or alterations can also help others remember your design principles with ease.
- What the principle means. This should be a descriptive definition that communicates the meaning of the principle.
- What it looks like for the principle to be honored. This can be done by giving examples of how various parts of your school honor the principle, or will honor it. For example, what does it look like for the principle to be honored in your instructional approach? During morning meetings? In your hiring practices? Etc. Some also find it helpful to define what the principle does not look like.



# EXPERIENCES

Programmed activities that key stakeholders—such as learners, educators, and families—engage in within the learning environment.

Documenting your experiences helps to communicate to various stakeholders what the day-to-day program within your learning environment entails and supports successful build out, training, and implementation.

## What will make this part of your design articulation *awesome*?

- ✓ **Be Clear:** The information presented should give readers a clear understanding of each experience.
- ✓ **Be Comprehensive:** Describe all of the core activities or components of the environment that learners', educators', and families' experience.
- ✓ **Ensure Experiences are Aligned to Graduate Aims:** The linkages between experiences and graduate aims should be clear and logical; experiences collectively should enable learners to meet all your desired aims.
- ✓ **Ensure Experiences Honor Design Principles:** Experiences should reflect your design principles, bringing an overall cohesiveness to the design.
- ✓ **Strive for Transformation:** The experiences should demonstrate a shift toward activities that will better prepare all young (See [Leaps](#)).

The experiences stakeholders have within your learning environment should help learners achieve the graduate aims you identified, and should honor your design principles. It is important to be intentional in the design of your



Long-View Micro School





Long-View Micro School

full constellation of experiences. Consider if the experiences will collectively help you achieve your aims, and if there are experiences that are unnecessary or redundant.

In the Learning Environment design articulation, all core stakeholder experiences should be captured at a general level. Experiences will likely differ in their duration, timing, and the stakeholders involved. In addition, experiences may evolve and manifest in unique ways across a stakeholder's overall journey. For example "Career exploration" may be an experience that entails one set of programming and activities for 9th grade, something else for 10th, and something else in 11th. For these reasons it is hard to estimate the number of experiences that you'll want to identify within your design articulation. Overall, just remember that an experience should be a large enough component of the overall stakeholder program to advance the grad aim(s) that it's focused on. Sometimes this will require a "larger" experience, and sometimes it will require a "smaller" experience.

The actual experiences could be documented in various forms, including a series of descriptions of what each stakeholder might be doing in a particular block of time, charts showing schedules, or "day/week/year in the life" narratives written from the stakeholders' perspectives. Whatever the form, we find it's important to include enough information to make it clear:

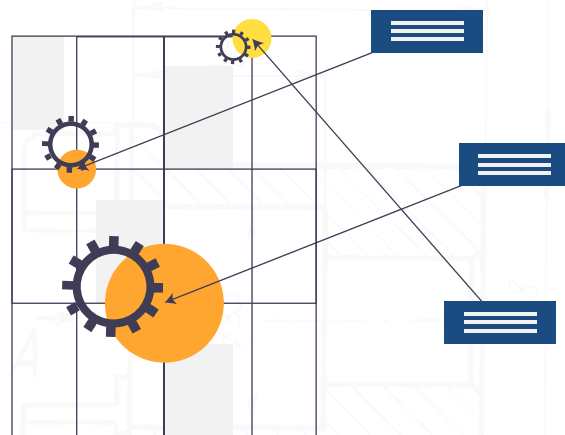
- What aims the experiences drive toward. You'll likely want to state this explicitly and describe the specific knowledge, skills, and mindsets the experiences foster related to the relevant aims.
- How the experiences honors your overall design principles. This may be apparent just from your description or you may want to explicitly write out how each experience supports each aim.
- The features of the experiences that ensure all young people are being prepared to thrive and transform the 21st century. Explaining this will require going into more detail about how different scaffolds and supports ensure the experiences are accessible, relevant, rigorous, and affirming to all students.



# SCHOOL ELEMENTS

The various approaches, structures, and resources related to areas like curriculum, hiring, technology, and more that enable experiences.

Documenting the design of each school element will communicate to various stakeholders what approaches, structures, and resources enable the learning environment to function as intended. It will also help you identify any tensions or incongruence between elements of your school and will support successful build out, training, and implementation. Finally it can provide potential adopters with guidance on whether they have the right system elements to adopt the model



## What will make this part of your design articulation *awesome*?

- ✓ **Be Clear:** The information presented should describes key design choices for each school element such that it's clear how each element operates across the learning environment as a whole.
- ✓ **Ensure Coherence:** The approaches to all school elements should align with and reinforce one another to create a cohesive design that is aligned to you graduate aims and design principles.
- ✓ **Strive for Transformation:** The decisions you make about each system element should demonstrate a shift toward approaches, structures, and resourcing that will better prepare all learners to thrive and transform the 21st century (See [Leaps](#)).

Learning environments are complex systems and the system elements are what brings your learning environment to life. As a result, there will be a lot to document about them.

We've found it's helpful to include:

- A description of how each system element functions in your learning environment. For example, how does assessment work? What are your hiring processes? What community partnerships do you have? Start with 3-5 sentences or bullet points for each system element and provide more detail if your approach to that system element is especially unique or multi-faceted. For example, an in-house teacher certification program or community partnerships that provide wrap around services may merit a more extensive description.
- Links to artifacts related to the descriptions. These could include standards and curricula documents, videos of high-quality instruction, blueprint of your physical space, sample communications collateral, etc.